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*Artistic Differences:
Ascetic Aesthetic
vs Opportunistic
Good Times*

TACOCAT

Greatest Hits (Gavin Bell, Jarrah de Kuijer
& Simon McGlinn)

and

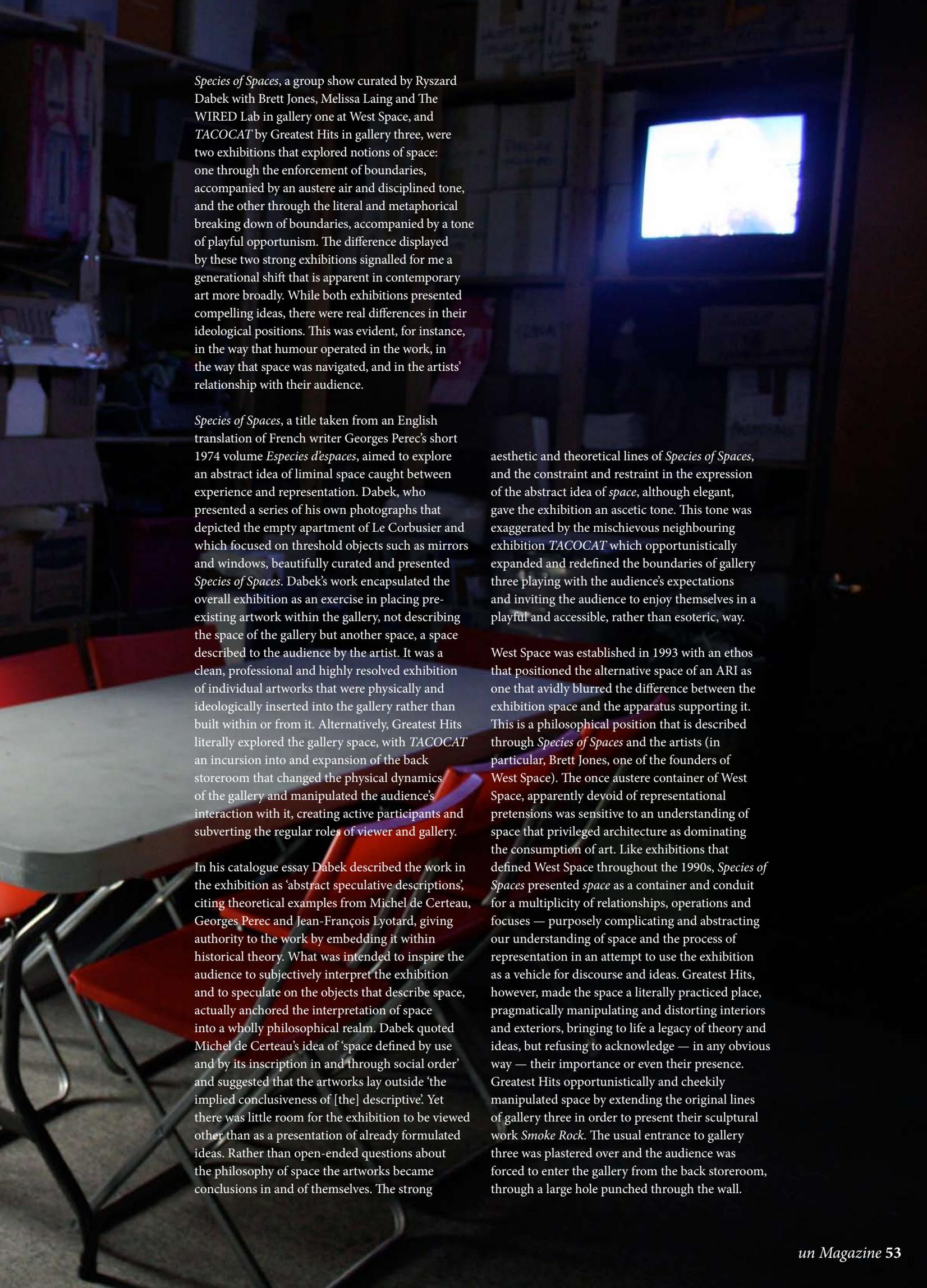
Species of Spaces

Curator: Ryszard Dabek

Artists: Ryszard Dabek, Brett Jones,
Melissa Laing and The WIRED Lab

12 June — 4 July 2009

Kelly Fliedner



Species of Spaces, a group show curated by Ryszard Dabek with Brett Jones, Melissa Laing and The WIRED Lab in gallery one at West Space, and *TACOCAT* by Greatest Hits in gallery three, were two exhibitions that explored notions of space: one through the enforcement of boundaries, accompanied by an austere air and disciplined tone, and the other through the literal and metaphorical breaking down of boundaries, accompanied by a tone of playful opportunism. The difference displayed by these two strong exhibitions signalled for me a generational shift that is apparent in contemporary art more broadly. While both exhibitions presented compelling ideas, there were real differences in their ideological positions. This was evident, for instance, in the way that humour operated in the work, in the way that space was navigated, and in the artists' relationship with their audience.

Species of Spaces, a title taken from an English translation of French writer Georges Perec's short 1974 volume *Especies d'espaces*, aimed to explore an abstract idea of liminal space caught between experience and representation. Dabek, who presented a series of his own photographs that depicted the empty apartment of Le Corbusier and which focused on threshold objects such as mirrors and windows, beautifully curated and presented *Species of Spaces*. Dabek's work encapsulated the overall exhibition as an exercise in placing pre-existing artwork within the gallery, not describing the space of the gallery but another space, a space described to the audience by the artist. It was a clean, professional and highly resolved exhibition of individual artworks that were physically and ideologically inserted into the gallery rather than built within or from it. Alternatively, Greatest Hits literally explored the gallery space, with *TACOCAT* an incursion into and expansion of the back storeroom that changed the physical dynamics of the gallery and manipulated the audience's interaction with it, creating active participants and subverting the regular roles of viewer and gallery.

In his catalogue essay Dabek described the work in the exhibition as 'abstract speculative descriptions', citing theoretical examples from Michel de Certeau, Georges Perec and Jean-François Lyotard, giving authority to the work by embedding it within historical theory. What was intended to inspire the audience to subjectively interpret the exhibition and to speculate on the objects that describe space, actually anchored the interpretation of space into a wholly philosophical realm. Dabek quoted Michel de Certeau's idea of 'space defined by use and by its inscription in and through social order' and suggested that the artworks lay outside 'the implied conclusiveness of [the] descriptive'. Yet there was little room for the exhibition to be viewed other than as a presentation of already formulated ideas. Rather than open-ended questions about the philosophy of space the artworks became conclusions in and of themselves. The strong

aesthetic and theoretical lines of *Species of Spaces*, and the constraint and restraint in the expression of the abstract idea of *space*, although elegant, gave the exhibition an ascetic tone. This tone was exaggerated by the mischievous neighbouring exhibition *TACOCAT* which opportunistically expanded and redefined the boundaries of gallery three playing with the audience's expectations and inviting the audience to enjoy themselves in a playful and accessible, rather than esoteric, way.

West Space was established in 1993 with an ethos that positioned the alternative space of an ARI as one that avidly blurred the difference between the exhibition space and the apparatus supporting it. This is a philosophical position that is described through *Species of Spaces* and the artists (in particular, Brett Jones, one of the founders of West Space). The once austere container of West Space, apparently devoid of representational pretensions was sensitive to an understanding of space that privileged architecture as dominating the consumption of art. Like exhibitions that defined West Space throughout the 1990s, *Species of Spaces* presented *space* as a container and conduit for a multiplicity of relationships, operations and focuses — purposely complicating and abstracting our understanding of space and the process of representation in an attempt to use the exhibition as a vehicle for discourse and ideas. Greatest Hits, however, made the space a literally practiced place, pragmatically manipulating and distorting interiors and exteriors, bringing to life a legacy of theory and ideas, but refusing to acknowledge — in any obvious way — their importance or even their presence. Greatest Hits opportunistically and cheekily manipulated space by extending the original lines of gallery three in order to present their sculptural work *Smoke Rock*. The usual entrance to gallery three was plastered over and the audience was forced to enter the gallery from the back storeroom, through a large hole punched through the wall.



Species of Spaces (installation view) 2009
 (top) Brett Jones
 (bottom, from left) Ryszard Dabek, Brett Jones

The audience was then met with an absurd installation — a startling white room, an old fridge used as a plinth and a smoke machine propping up a mound of concrete decorated with stickers, chewing gum and a few cigarette butts. The combination of harsh fluoro light and smoke obscured the depth of the room, making it an uncomfortable and disorienting place to linger, whilst a colourful bean-bag on the floor invited the audience to sit and loiter within the room. This completed the playful caricature of a gallery space, within the space of the gallery. In comparison to the harsh environment of gallery three, the cool, dark storeroom offered a relief for the audience and housed two videos, each placed with a much needed and comfortable amount of room. This alternate presentation of artwork, which took place outside the regular gallery space, acknowledged the potential of ongoing activity within a workshop environment.

To describe space is not merely to re-present it but rather to instigate processes that allow an audience to inhabit it. The space presented by *Greatest Hits* alluded to an ever-progressing practice and was an attempt to defy rational outcome-based approaches to exhibitions. This was in contrast to the highly refined and almost static *Species of Spaces*. While there was an obvious element of humour to the *TACOCAT* installation, there was also an implicit and sincere questioning about the space of the gallery and the role of the audience, whilst also embodying a pathos that recognised the impossibility of seeking concise answers, similar to the open-ended and answerless questions presented in *Species of Spaces*. The experience of the exhibition — the entry through the storeroom, the venturing into awkward space and the invitation to the audience to enjoy themselves in an unassuming and simple way — positioned the installation as one that was obliquely peering at itself. The mode of humour adopted by *Greatest Hits* is one that seems to position the objective of ‘understanding’ as an absurd task. Compared to the genuine seriousness of *Species of Spaces*, *Greatest Hits* project embodied a flippant and ubiquitous irony, which, for me, is in no way a reductive stance. This outlook perhaps defines the current generation who, as Francis Fukuyama described in his *The End of History*, have lost the ability to control or propel a narrative of their own history. Indeed this dissipation of any ‘grand’ historical narrative has perhaps worn away my generation’s aspiration for authority or entitlement, something which possibly defined the previous generation. The artists in *Species of Spaces* grew up in a postmodern era of deconstruction. They celebrated theory, they believed in the possibilities for political change, and, most differently, they perhaps believed they could create political resolutions.



The intention of both *Species of Spaces* and *TACOCAT* was to take something familiar (an object, an image, a material, a word, or social intervention) and manipulate it into something that challenged the viewer's perceptual awareness. The main difference between the two projects was that *Species of Spaces* was intentionally placed within an institutional and historical discourse through its rich conceptual and theoretical background, while *Greatest Hits* automatically — and maybe unconsciously — subsumed that discourse and then rejected it as lacking currency with the attitudes of their generation. These gestures move away from an art that is dictated by theory and architectural space to an art that uses the space in a more advantageous and opportunistic mode — creating a space for art rather than recreating the art of space. The simple absurdity of and humour within *TACOCAT* mocked the fixed art object in *Species of Spaces*, its presence and its concreteness. Although both exhibitions approached the uncertainty and crisis experienced by an audience negotiating ideas of space at the end of postmodernism, *Greatest Hits* just has a little more fun doing it and appeared to present new energies for a new generation.

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